

The Real World

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"You have to live in the real world." We've all heard that before, haven't we? Usually, it's something we might say to someone who is so idealistic that it seems like they don't live in reality. You know, "That's great that you want to spend your life helping people, but you have to find a way to make money doing it. You have to live in the real world." While we usually don't say specifically what we mean by the "real world," I think we all have sort of an agreed upon understanding. The powerful will rule over the weak. You need money (and a lot of it) to do anything. Being rich is better than being poor. Having security is the same as having peace of mind. And so on.

But then we also have this story that we keep telling this time of year. It's the same story we tell every year. It's the story of how God did not choose a prominent or powerful person to bring Jesus into the world, but one who was lowly, who was deemed insignificant – Mary – to be the mother of Jesus. We have this story where it wasn't the religious elite who came bringing gifts, but foreigners, people who practiced a different religion who came to offer their best to Jesus. And we have this story where angels appeared not to princes and kings but to shepherds out in the fields all night, working hard to scrap by, to be the first ones to come and worship Jesus. Every single person in the Christmas story fits the definition of lowly in some form or fashion.

Mary – an unwed pregnant girl, a poor peasant ruled over by the Romans

Joseph – also a poor peasant, ruled over by the Romans

Shepherds – considered unclean because of their occupation, ruled over by the Romans

The wise men – foreigners, people outside the community of Israel, people who practiced a different religion and would therefore be considered outside of God's love.

And finally – a manger, a barn – a place for the animals where Jesus was born because there was no room for him in the inn.

This is the Christmas story. These people are the central characters. This is the central place.

And no one articulated how radical this story is more so than Mary. The powerful are cast down from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up. The hungry are filled and the rich sent away empty. In fact, Mary was so confident in this reality, that she sang about it in the past tense, as if it has already happened. Now think about that

for a minute. Mary was a poor, unwed peasant girl who lived under the Roman occupation, who would likely have been called every unpleasant name in the book for being pregnant without a husband. Mary knew all about the “real world.” She, and people like her, were crushed by the real world every day. And yet, in the midst of all that, Mary proclaimed a different reality. A different kingdom. A different story.

And so I guess the question that we have to ask ourselves every year when we hear this story is, “Do we believe it?” I don’t just mean do we believe that Jesus was born to Mary 2000 years ago in a barn. I don’t just mean do we believe that angels appeared to shepherds and a star guided wise men. What I mean is do we believe what this story says about who God is and how God works? Do we believe that there is a deeper reality than the one that seems to be all around us? I think that is the ultimate question that Advent asks of us – does God bring salvation for the whole world through the lowly and is a part of that salvation that the lowly ones will be lifted up while the mighty cast down? That’s the question that Mary’s song asks of us.

And I don’t know about you, but Mary’s song makes me pretty uncomfortable. Because you see, I’m not one of the hungry. I’m not one of the lowly. I have had access to an elite education, I am financially comfortable, I have health insurance and a pension. I am white. I am male. I have never been sexually harassed or assaulted. For that matter, I’ve never been assaulted in any way. I am straight. I have virtually every level of privilege that exists in our society. I am one of the mighty ones... which means Mary’s song is terrifying for me. And my guess is that I’m not the only one here for whom Mary’s song is a little scary. I think a very real question emerges – where do I, and people like me, fit in with the message that Mary sings? Or maybe another way to ask it is how exactly does God bring down the mighty from their thrones?

I’ve thought a lot about that question and I think that it’s not so much that God intervenes and throws the mighty down from their thrones so much as it is that the mighty do that to themselves. To live only for oneself, to seek to accumulate more and more on the backs of the poor and the lowly, to think that wealth, that power, that things can lead to happiness is to constantly be disappointed and it leads to a life of loneliness. The great paradox of life, the great paradox behind Mary’s words, and I would argue maybe the great paradox of our entire gospel is that we find life when we give ours away, we find joy when we seek to make others happy, we find meaning when we share of what we have for others. You see, more and more, I think the only hope the mighty have to find joy, to find hope, to find life is to use their might, to use their wealth to use their privilege to lift up the lowly. Because otherwise, what’s the point of that life? What gives that life meaning?

There’s another character in this story who I think serves as a really good role model for those of us who are not lowly – Mary’s cousin Elizabeth. Now Elizabeth was also pregnant, but she was married. She would not have had to endure the

stares and the gossip that Mary did. Furthermore, Elizabeth was the wife of the priest, making her family one of the most respected in her town. Mary had been pregnant for a while when she set out to visit Elizabeth. She had likely started to show. And my guess is the whole “conception by the Holy Spirit” argument didn’t convince a whole lot of people in her home town. I imagine she had lived with the whispers and maybe even the blatant derogatory names she would have likely been called. We don’t know this, but I wonder if Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth simply because she couldn’t stand to be in her hometown any longer.

So Mary set out to her older cousin and upon seeing her, Elizabeth immediately offers a greeting not of condemnation or rebuke, but a greeting of blessings, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.” In a few verses, Mary will say that “All generations will call me blessed,” but note that before Mary can name herself blessed, Elizabeth does it for her.

In Elizabeth, Mary found the one person who would always be in her corner. When others called her a sinner, Elizabeth called her blessed. When others called her an adulterer, Elizabeth called her blessed. When others called her unclean and defiled, Elizabeth called her blessed. And I wonder if Elizabeth is the reason why Mary could so boldly proclaim that the lowly would be lifted up because Elizabeth had just lifted up the lowly, she had just lifted up Mary. And I wonder if Elizabeth then is the example, for many of us – that we too live into the reality that Mary sings when we use our places of respect and power and wealth and privilege to lift up those who are lowly – to name those who have been called unclean, blessed...to name those who have been called unnatural, blessed, to name those who have been called an abomination, blessed...to name those who have been called illegal, blessed.

Rather than using her privilege to isolate and protect herself, Elizabeth used it to speak words of blessing and comfort to one who was considered unclean. By welcoming and extending hospitality to the lowly who have been cast out, by recognizing that we share a common humanity with them, then, we like, Elizabeth also get to participate in Mary’s song.

And that brings us back to the question of the “real world.” I think that deep down, we actually know that Mary and Elizabeth got it right. We actually know that the “real world” is not the one where we should seek power, wealth, and security, but rather one where we find life, we find joy, we find meaning, when we give of ourselves for the sake of others.

Sometimes, art can tell us the truth about ourselves better than anything else. Can you think of any Christmas movie where someone finds meaning and fulfillment through greed? Can you think of any Christmas movie where someone finds meaning and fulfillment through tearing people apart or tearing them down. Seriously, can you think of any Christmas movie where someone says, “I’m so

fulfilled. I just took away health insurance from my employees.” “Life is so meaningful, I just built another slum apartment building.” Of course not, because deep down we know that lifting ourselves up no matter how much we hurt others does not bring us joy or make our life meaningful. All of the stories we tell at Christmas – both secular and sacred – seem to just intuitively understand the truth of Mary’s song – that we find life and joy and hope when we use what we have to lift others up.

One of the most iconic pieces of literature and also film for the Christmas season is Charles Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol*. I imagine most all of you have either read it or seen a film or play based off the book. You know the story -- Ebenezer Scrooge is the richest man in town...and the greediest. He mistreats his employee Bob Cratchett, the father of the sick Tiny Tim. And yet throughout the story, Bob, Tiny Tim, and their family, in the midst of their poverty keep finding ways to experience joy while Ebenezer Scrooge knows only misery, his money his only company as his greed has driven all others away. Scrooge is visited by three ghosts who show him the reality of his life and the impact it has on others. At the end of the story, Scrooge has a change of heart and we have the iconic scene where Scrooge tells Bob Cratchett that he will raise his salary and that he would like to help take care of Tiny Tim. As Cratchett leaves Scrooge’s office, Scrooge says, “I never knew I could be this happy. I don’t deserve to be this happy.” Scrooge discovered the great truth that Mary proclaims and that Elizabeth lived by – happiness, joy, life is found when we strive to make others happy, to give them joy, to give them life.

You see, I believe that Mary’s song is not just good news for the poor and the lowly. I believe it is actually good news for everybody if we just trust her enough, if we just trust the Christmas story enough, if we just trust our faith enough to live into the words of this song and trust that our life and our joy is found in working to lift up all people, especially the lowly.

So yes, we do have to live in the real world. And Mary tells us exactly what the real world looks like. Amen.